



Jane Austen and  
*Timour, the Tartar*

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IT IS WELL DOCUMENTED that Jane Austen was a committed theatre-goer; it is also recorded that the last theatre performance she ever attended was at Covent Garden, on 28 November 1814. The play performed that evening was *Isabella; or, The Fatal Marriage* (adapted by David Garrick, from an earlier play by Thomas Southerne), and starred the “elegant creature” Eliza O’Neill, who had falsely raised Jane Austen’s hopes that she would need “two Pocket handkerchiefs” to stop the flow of tears occasioned by the tragic tale of Isabella’s heart-rending plight. But the next day, in a letter to her niece Anna Lefroy, Jane Austen comments that “I do not think she [the actress “Miss O’neal”(sic)] was quite equal to my expectation.” Jane Austen deplores the fact that she had very little occasion to use either handkerchief, but she notes how delightfully the young actress hugs her co-star, “Mr Younge”(sic). In her letter, she does not mention the second play, *Timour, The Tartar*, that was on the playbill at Covent Garden on that cold Monday evening in 1814.

The author was in the company of her brother Edward Knight; also present was Edward’s eldest son, Edward, Jane’s nephew, who was then aged twenty. Edward Knight was known



to hate spending a whole evening at the theatre, as performances in most Georgian theatres might last three hours or more, especially if Shakespeare was on the playbill. It is unlikely, however, that Jane or her brother and nephew, Edward, would leave the theatre during a performance which was to include a troop of live horses racing across the stage!

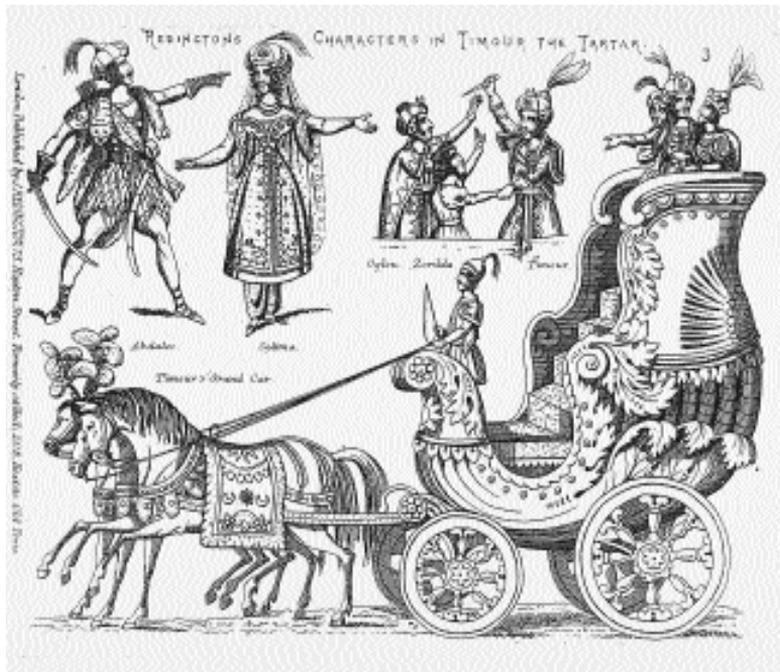
The craze for using horses on-stage had begun when they were first used in *Blue Beard*, at Drury Lane; not to be outdone, Covent Garden now used them to great effect in this exciting new play, *Timour, The Tartar*, by Matthew Gregory Lewis, author of the sensational Gothic novel, *The Monk* (a novel of which even John Thorpe, in *Northanger Abbey*, had heard). In 1811 the manager of Covent Garden had begged Lewis to write a spectacular piece for the theatre, whatever it might be, as long as horses could again appear, to enchant the audience. *Timour, The Tartar* was the result, which gave Covent Garden a success for the next few seasons.

In 1811, *The Times* had praised the play, saying that it was one display of splendor and equitation from beginning to end, with the caveat that the story was the worst the critic had ever



sat through. The story concerns Timour (Tamburlaine, in Christopher Marlow's earlier version of the story), a Tartar of low origin, who has killed the Prince of Mingrelia, and keeps the heir, Agib, a little boy, as his prisoner. Wishing to strengthen his throne by marriage to a Georgian princess, he sends an embassy to demand the princess as his bride. Princess Zorilda, widow of the murdered prince, impersonates the Georgian Princess, in an endeavor to rescue her child. Her plan is discovered, and Timour locks her up in a grim fortress. Her charms capture his fierce heart, and he insists she wed him or see young Agib slain. Agib escapes to the Georgian warriors, who have surrounded the fortress. Timour appears on the battlements with Zorilda as hostage, but the plucky girl escapes by a rather "unfeminine exertion of agility," the fortress is stormed, and Timour taken prisoner, whilst his soldiers are routed.

The audience raved about *Timour, The Tartar*, acclaiming as the star of the piece the white horse which carried Zorilda, the Princess of Mingrelia (played by Mrs. Johnston). The horse knelt, he leaped, he tumbled, he fought, he dashed into the water in a



very superior style of acting; he completely enraptured both audience and critics. The scene in which Zorilda jumps down into the waves and is saved by her son on horseback, “ascending the cascade,” was considered very fine, but the actress portraying Zorilda was given quite awful reviews, although *The Times* grudgingly admitted that she sat her horse gracefully.

The horses were the principal performers of the piece, outshining even the efforts of Mr. Farley, playing Timour, who gave an “indistinct roar which answered for love and hate” throughout the evening. The sets and costumes surpassed the usual standards of that period; for example, when Zorilda made her first entrance, she was riding her courser, attended by four African boys, and dressed in a jeweled white satin robe (under a crimson cloak), gold breast plate, feathered helmet, and yellow leather boots. The effect was stunning. When the management of Covent Garden promised sets and costumes of renewed splendor on the playbills for *Timour’s* performances, that is exactly what the audience got.

Did Jane Austen see *Timour, The Tartar*? Her letter to Anna,

written the very next day, is in fragments now, and mentions only *Isabella*. But, as it was Jane Austen's *last* visit to the theatre, in her short lifetime, we can only hope she did see those galloping horses and the dazzling Mrs. Johnston in her sumptuous costume, riding that lovely white charger.

#### WORKS CITED

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